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Some Reflections on Hindu Kingship

There was no single tradition of kingship in ancient India, and no single source of royal institutions, symbols, or theories of rule. Instead, there was a long history of various types of political systems and religious traditions that led to a distinctive Indian pattern of regional kingdoms based often on different concepts of the nature and role of kings. It was not until the rise of the Gupta Empire and the formation of Hindu kingdoms that a more or less normative system of kingship emerged throughout India, but its spread was through the establishment of regional kingdoms with limited geographical control and usually short duration. No single Hindu kingdom ever controlled all or even most of India, and the power of even the greatest regional kingdoms seldom lasted more than a few centuries.

Later Hindus looked back to the Gupta Empire as the classical age of Hindu glory, but the effective political power of the Empire itself lasted for less than two hundred years from its founding in 320 CE to its decline near the end of the fifth century. Buddhist and Jain kings ruled in various regions even centuries later, despite the rise of numerous new Hindu kingdoms, while other areas retained their earlier tribal traditions. Hindu kingdoms had gradually gained control over most of India by the time of the Muslim conquests of the late 12th century, but the creation of Muslim kingdoms in northern and central India brought an effective end to Hindu political power except in the Dravidian regions of the Deccan. The last Hindu kingdom with any claim to major status was the Vijayanagar Empire, which controlled most of South

India from its rise in the 14th century to its defeat in 1565 by a coalition of Muslim states to its north. By the latter date, the Moghul Empire was emerging in North India and European powers had trading centers along the coast, leaving little chance for later Hindu kingdoms to do more than cling to limited regional control.

In terms of the issues of upward displacement and the transcendence of boundaries, it seems from this account that Hindu kingship and/or kings had little capacity for either. Only the Imperial Guptas controlled the whole of North India from Bengal to the far northwestern corner, and that control lasted only from the conquests of Candragupta II in the late fourth century until the Hūṇa invasions of the late fifth century. Before Candragupta II (380-414), the empire was challenged in the west by the Śaka Kṣatrapas; by the late fifth century it had lost the western region again -- this time to the Hūṇas -- and was facing the gradual breaking away of formerly subservient kingdoms in the southern and central regions. Moreover, it is not clear that the empire could even be considered Hindu during the reign of Skandagupta (455-467), the last major Gupta ruler, because his personal support (though not the bulk of imperial patronage) was given more to Buddhism than to the Brahmanical Hinduism -- especially Vaiṣṇavism -- that inspired his grandfather Candragupta II.

Between the Guptas and the Vijayanagar Empire, for nearly a thousand years, none of the many powerful Hindu kingdoms that emerged in various regions ever controlled more than a portion of either North or South India, and most spent their energies warding off challenges from rival kingdoms. Even the great Vijayanagar rulers struggled throughout their more than two centuries of power against not only the Muslim states to their north but also against rival Hindu dynasties. No Hindu king, it appears, from the imperial Guptas onward, could acquire the kind of transcendent

authority that gave him status beyond his own personal political and military achievements, and each new king had to start afresh to prove himself without the assumption that he was more than a mortal actor in a pragmatic human role.

This history of Hindu kings is especially striking in a culture where the line between humans and gods was traditionally blurred, where the great epic kings Rāma and Kṛṣṇa were worshipped as divine saviors, and where numerous saints of all ages have been considered divine incarnations. Historical kings, by contrast, were never granted similar personal status. As human protectors of society and its dharma, their kingdoms were strictly of this world and, denied transcendence and divinity either before or after death, they could not be personal agents of salvation even within their own kingdoms. Divine qualities were at times ascribed to them, and comparisons were made between kings and their divine prototypes, but the kings themselves remained solidly enmeshed in the world of karma, limited in their authority to their earthly territorial domains.

The history of Hindu kings, however, is only one part of the larger history of what we now call "Hinduism": i.e., the complex of Brahmanically-sanctioned ways of salvation, predominantly theistic, that spread throughout India in the first millennium C.E. It goes without saying, of course, that there could be no "Hindu" kings without a Hindu culture to provide that designation, but the connection is stronger than that: there was also no "Hinduism" as we later know it before there were "Hindu" kings -- i.e., before the early Gupta rulers.

We need to be careful about terminology here, because "Hindu" was not a word used by any group at that time to define themselves or their religious identity. None of the "Hindu" kings in the first millennium C.E. ever called themselves "Hindus," nor did

any of the various religious groups that we now consider "Hindu." Moreover, as far as we know, the latter did not initially even see themselves as part of a larger pattern, let alone that of "Hinduism," but identified themselves in terms of their particular deities, practices, and communities.

There was nonetheless a pattern emerging in the centuries before the Guptas that we can identify in retrospect as the formative stage of "Hinduism" as we later know it, and there were kings among the early Guptas whose role in this pattern allows us to call them "Hindu" kings. The terms themselves may be anachronistic, but they do refer to real phenomena that mark the appearance of something new in the Indian religious tradition: the convergence of a wide variety of largely independent theistic religions into a Brahmanically-sanctioned religious system with royal patronage. Whatever this system may be appropriately called (we will call it "Hinduism" here for want of a better term), the significant facts are that it reached its formative stage during the reign of the Imperial Guptas and that it was, from that time onward, the dominant factor not only in shaping Indian religious life but in defining the roles of Indian kings.

The origins of this new religious development -- or at least the first visible evidence -- appeared during the period from 500 to 200 BCE, a period that is marked by the consolidation of urbanization in the Ganges-Yamuna valley, the rise of Buddhism, the entry of Alexander into western India, the establishment of a permanent Greek cultural presence in Bactria and Iran in the form of the Seleucid Empire, the creation of the Mauryan Empire and its expansion under Candragupta and Aśoka westward across North India to the Seleucid border and southward into the Deccan, the composition of the final portion of the Vedic Upaniṣads, and the appearance of a

series of texts beginning with the Dharma-sūtras that set forth Brahmanical ideals for the organization of Indian society.

The underlying dynamic of this complex period was the urbanization of North India, a process based on the spread of rice cultivation in the Ganges-Yamunā valley and the introduction of iron by around 1000 BCE, the establishment of regional kingdoms and the first urban centers in the upper Ganges-Yamunā region between ca. 800 and 600 BCE, and the eastward expansion of this emerging urban culture into the lower Ganges valley by ca. 500 BCE. By the time of the Buddha (ca. 563-483 BCE), the kingdom of Magadha on the eastern end of this expanding urban culture was beginning its own territorial expansion westward from its urban center at Rājagṛiha -- a historical development that gives us a chronological fix on the initial urbanization process and a convenient starting point for the period that followed. A further fix is provided by the entry of Persian forces into the region known as Gandhāra in northwest India during the reign of the first Achaemenid ruler, Cyrus the Great (ca. 558-530 BCE), and the annexation of the entire Indus Valley region into the Persian Empire by his successor Darius (522-486 BCE). By 500 BCE, all of northern India was thus bracketed between two powerful kingdoms, Magadha and Achaemenid Persia, neither of which was ruled by kings who honored Brahmanical authority, with the region in between controlled by a variety of Āryan/Vedic kingdoms whose traditional culture was being eroded by urbanization -- kingdoms that would, over the next two centuries, be swallowed up by the expansion first of Magadha and then of the Mauryan Empire.

It was within this setting that we find the first clear evidence for two of the types of theism that appear in later Hinduism: the goddess tradition and the worship of

Rudra/Śiva. The evidence for the former, and the earliest evidence of any sort for Indian theistic religion, is the terracotta female figurines found in increasing numbers at most of the early urban sites in the Ganges-Yamunā Valley from as early as 700 BCE (Gupta, Roots of Indian Art, 138 ff.). Undoubtedly based on earlier village-level prototypes made of less permanent materials, these terracotta figurines show a remarkable similarity in style and symbolism to the much earlier terracotta female figurines of the Indus Civilization -- a continuity that cannot be traced as yet by an unbroken artifactual record, but one that we know is possible from the established continuity of village culture over the intervening millennium. Leaving aside this question of Indus prototypes, the appearance of terracotta female figurines at early Gangetic urban sites must reflect the movement of village people into the growing urban centers and the creation of a terracotta industry to meet the new market for goddess images.

The creation of this new industry had major implications for Indian art as well as Indian religion, as S. P. Gupta has pointed out (Roots of Indian Art, 171-182), because it established a form of representation responsive to the interests and traditions of an urban "middle class" of craftsmen, merchants, and traders who still maintained close connections with their village origins -- as has been true throughout Indian history. The growth of this industry paralleled the growing complexity and sophistication of the Gangetic urban culture, as can be seen in the evolution of terracotta female figurines from hand-shaped figures in the pre-Mauryan period to the use of facial molds in the early Mauryan period and the appearance of fully-molded figures and/or molded plaques by the end of the Mauryan period around 185 BCE. It is clear that figurines had become a trade item by at least the time of the Mauryans, since similar figurines --

at times apparently using the same facial molds -- have been found at different sites along the trade routes that intertwined the urbanized Ganges-Yamunā region. It also seems clear that the styles of terracotta female figurines developed by the end of the Mauryan period served as models for the first stone carvings of yakṣīs on Buddhist monuments in the post-Mauryan period, reflecting the popular interest in these life-giving goddesses even -- or perhaps one should say especially -- in the context of Buddhist stupas whose official symbolism was that of death and burial.

It should be noted that this goddess tradition was a genuinely popular tradition that was manifested in art in the form of both terracotta figurines and stone sculpture long before there were any known texts, explicit mythologies, or even established names associated with it. Long a central feature of village life, the goddess tradition had entered urban life as well by the Mauryan period. The absence of female figurines on any Aśokan monuments shows that goddesses had no place in his imperial religion, but the prominent place of yakṣīs on post-Mauryan Buddhist monuments indicates that goddesses were an important part of the religious concerns of even the Buddhist merchants and laypersons who sponsored this art along the trade routes and in the cities that they frequented. Though not yet given structure in any formal system, it is evident that this component of later theistic Hinduism was very much a part of Indian religious life at many cultural levels by 200 BCE.

The other element of later Hinduism that we can see in the period prior to 200 BCE, the worship of Rudra/Śiva, is evidenced in a totally different context: not in art or popular religious forms, but in the Brahmanically-produced Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. Early Upaniṣads from the period of 800-500 BCE emphasized impersonal Brahman as the ultimate reality and source of all being, and taught that release from rebirth could

be achieved only by direct awareness or knowledge of that Brahman as identical with one's own true self (ātman). The Śvetāśvatara, however, which dates from a slightly later time, emphasized the personal aspect of Brahman as Rudra, Mahādeva (the "Great Lord") or Śiva (the "Auspicious"), the Creator and Ruler of all the worlds, who pervades all things and dwells in all beings as their Self. This Rudra/Śiva is to be known within one's heart as the indwelling Lord (Īśa), and is called on to grant his worshippers knowledge of him by means of their yogic meditation. Brahman is still the ultimate reality, but Brahman now has a personal identity as Rudra, Śiva, Īśa, Mahādeva, or Hara -- names the Śvetāśvatara uses as equivalents, and which remain as names of Śiva in later Hinduism.

Even with this personalizing of Brahman, however, what we find in the Śvetāśvatara can hardly be called full-blown theism. The Lord Rudra/Śiva has names, but is otherwise an Upaniṣadic abstraction; he is the Creator and Ruler of the world, but with no mythic context to give these terms meaning. There is no anthropomorphic description of his appearance or actions to give substance to his personification, nor can he be known except through meditation on his internal presence in one's heart. The sense one gets from this Upaniṣad is that the authors know a Śiva who is more real and vital to them and whose names -- Mahādeva, Īśa, Hara -- have more personal significance, but that the process of fitting this Lord into the Upaniṣadic metaphysics has filtered out all but his most abstract qualities. However that may be, it is only in the following period, between 200 BCE and the Guptas, that we get the complete picture of this emerging deity.

What is true of Śiva is even more true of the other major male Hindu deity, Viṣṇu. Unlike Rudra/Śiva, Viṣṇu was a mainstream Vedic deva in good standing from

early Vedic times. Rudra appears in the Vedas mainly as a fierce and rather fearsome god of storms, disease, and the untamed forces of nature, and Vedic ritual texts (the Brāhmaṇas) tell of his initial exclusion from any portion of the offerings in Vedic fire sacrifice. Viṣṇu, by contrast, is portrayed positively throughout the Vedas as an aide to other gods such as Indra in overcoming demons, as the pervader of the three worlds (earth, atmosphere, and heaven) to secure them for gods and men, and as the one whose "highest step," beyond the knowledge of mortals, establishes the ultimate goal at the summit of the universe. Although Viṣṇu receives far less attention than Indra in the Vedic hymns, his special qualities parallel those of the fire sacrifice and he is, in some late Brāhmaṇas, identified with the fire sacrifice itself. All of these associations -- protection, universal pervasiveness, transcendence, and the creative power of the sacrifice -- prepared the way for Viṣṇu's later rise to prominence as a major Hindu deity, but this development took place after -- or outside -- the Vedic scriptures. There is no Upaniṣad that honors Viṣṇu as the Śvetāśvatara honors Rudra/Śiva, and we can only assume that Viṣṇu's connections with the sacrifice and world order made him less attractive to the world-renouncing Upaniṣadic seers than the more ambivalent Śiva whose home is variously said to be in forests, mountain caves, cemeteries, or crossroads. However that may be, the apotheosis of Viṣṇu -- like the final apotheosis of Śiva as a comprehensive deity -- came only after the end of the Vedic period.

If the major Hindu deities are only foreshadowed before around 200 BCE, however, there is no lack of evidence for their importance in the centuries that follow. As soon as we move from the Vedas to the Epics, which took their final form between 200 BCE and the early Guptas, we find massive evidence of a mature theism and of a new kind of divine involvement in the world. All of the main protagonists in the

Mahābhārata, the longer of the two Epics, are kings, princes, and their wives, and all are directly involved in divine-human relationships of some sort: the villain, the Kuru prince Duryodhana, is an incarnation of Kali, demon of discord; the heroes, the five Pāṇḍava brothers, are all sons of gods by their father's two queens (Yudhishthira, Bhīma, and Arjuna are sons of queen Kuntī by Dharma, Vāyu, and Indra respectively, and their twin brothers Nakula and Sahadeva are sons of the junior queen Mādnī by the divine Aśvins); the Pāṇḍavas' common polyandrous wife Draupadī is an incarnation of Śrī, goddess of prosperity; and the Pāṇḍavas' cousin, friend, and mentor, the Yādava prince Kṛṣṇa, is an incarnation of Viṣṇu himself. Much the same pattern appears in the Rāmāyana, where the villain is the demon king Rāvana and the hero, Rāma, is an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

Viṣṇu's incarnations as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are clearly the most important theistic elements in the two Epics, both within these texts themselves and in their influence on later Hinduism. It is not at all clear when or where the concept of divine incarnations (avatāras, or "descents") first emerged, because its earliest expression is apparently in the Mahābhārata and it is already in this epic a fully developed idea. The Bhagavad-Gītā, written around 150 BCE as an integral part of the Mahābhārata, presents the classical explanation of the avatāra principle through the teachings of the warrior prince Kṛṣṇa, himself an avatāra of the universal Lord, who tells Arjuna that he has "come into being age after age" whenever dharma declines and unrighteousness (adharma) increases, sending himself forth in order to protect the good, punish the wicked, and establish righteousness firmly in the world (Bh.G. 4:7-8). The divine avatāra, at least of Viṣṇu, is thus directly related to dharma and world order, a purpose underlined by the emphasis on dharma not only in the Gītā but throughout the rest of

the Mahābhārata and in the Rāmāyana as well. In the latter epic, Rāma himself is the exemplar of dharma as a righteous king; in the Mahābhārata, the emphasis is on the importance of dharma for society as a whole and -- especially in the Gītā -- on the importance of each person performing his own dharma (svadharma) in accordance with his own nature (svabhāva).

Taking these works as a whole, we can say that the purpose of divine rule is to ensure the proper functioning of society in accordance with dharma -- a dharma that is not uniform for all persons, but that varies broadly with the class (varṇa) and specifically with the individual nature (svabhāva) of each member of society. This distribution of qualities, personal nature, and relevant dharma to each individual is not arbitrary, but is the result of the past actions (karma) of that person. The present conditions of birth and the inherent nature of each person born are alike the consequent of karma accumulated over time in an endless cycle of rebirths, and it is the duty (dharma) of each person to act in accordance with the conditions and qualities that he has in fact created for himself. Performing one's appropriate dharma properly will improve one's future condition, but ideally -- as the Gītā emphasizes -- one should act selflessly not for personal gain but for the proper maintenance of world order; one should act, as the Gītā argues, as the Lord himself acts when he enters the world to uphold dharma and establish its firm foundation.

It is important to note the historical situation in which these teachings in the Epics were developed: i.e., the historical situation in the centuries from ca. 500 BCE to the completion of the Epics around the time of the Guptas. For the Brahmanical tradition, whose views predominate in the Epic teachings, this was indeed a period when the proper dharma of society was threatened in many ways. The expansion of

Magadha and the subsequent expansion of the Mauryan Empire, both on top of the spreading urbanization of North India, effectively undermined the traditional Āryan/Vedic kingdoms in the central region of the Ganges-Yamunā valley -- the region variously known as Madhyadeśa (the midlands) or Āryāvarta (the land of the Āryans). This region where Āryan kings had long affirmed their authority by means of Vedic fire sacrifices and royal Vedic ceremonies was characterized increasingly by a mobile urban society in which non-Āryan populations from villages and tribal regions played an important role not only in the cities themselves but in the commercial networks that connected them with each other and with territories beyond. The beginning of this process, combined with the new concept of rebirth as a result of desirous actions, had led many even within the Brahmanical tradition to question the value of sacrifices aimed at worldly rewards and to doubt the possibility of a permanent sacrificially-produced immortality in the World of the Fathers. As the social and political changes increased, more and more of the Vedic-educated elite followed the lead of Upaniṣadic seers in seeking a true immortality and permanent release from rebirth by withdrawing from society in an effort to gain final liberating knowledge. This trend was strengthened by the emergence of ascetic movements such as the Jains and Ājīvakas that taught an even more radical rejection of worldly life and, especially after Aśoka, by the growth of a popular Buddhist movement whose central institution -- the Sangha -- ignored Brahmanical authority and taught a dharma whose highest value was the cessation of desire by meditation, the practice of non-injury, and living a celibate monastic life.

Those who sought to preserve a society based on Brahmanical values had few supports at a time when traditional Āryan kingdoms were being dominated or

destroyed by the expanding kingdoms of Magadha and the Mauryans with their non-traditional rulers and their support of non-Brahmanical religions. The collapse of the Mauryan Empire after Aśoka did allow a reemergence of kingdoms that honored Brahmanical institutions, but few if any of the new post-Mauryan kings were from the traditional Āryan ruling class. Their support of Vedic rituals was no doubt a relief after generations of Mauryan rule, yet the frequently proclaimed performances of royal horse sacrifices seem mainly intended to compensate for their dubious legitimacy. In any event, whatever the sincerity of their support for Brahmanical traditions, they failed in the end to fulfill the responsibility that Mauryan rulers had managed throughout their reign: the defense of India's western frontiers against intrusion from outside.

Within a century after Aśoka's death in 232 BCE, and less than fifty years after the last Mauryan ruler, this frontier was being breeched -- especially in the northwest region -- by a succession of foreign invaders who eventually controlled most of western and northern India from the Indus valley to the central Ganges valley, including all of Madhyadeśa. The major native dynasties of the time -- the Śungas, who succeeded the Mauryans in the north (187-75 BCE); the Kāṇvas, who wrested control from the Śungas in the region of Vidiśā in eastern Mālwā (75-30 BCE); and the Andhra-based Śātavāhanas, who ruled the northern Deccan and portions of the former Śunga and Kāṇva territories in central India and Mālwā (30 BCE - ca. 203 CE) -- all struggled against the advancing foreign intruders as they did against each other, but by the second century CE only the Śātavāhanas remained as royal defenders of Brahmanical tradition -- and they, as a northern Deccan tribal people before their rise to power, were clearly not of Āryan stock.

From a Brahmanical point of view, however, the situation by that time was even worse to the north and west of Śātavāhana territory. Starting in the early second century BCE, successive waves of foreigners had entered northwest India and spread outward into former Mauryan territories, each in turn pressed from behind by new invaders. The staging area for these invasions was Bactria, a former Persian province in northern Afghanistan that had been conquered by Alexander in 329 BCE and had remained a center of Greek culture since that time.

Initially part of the Seleucid Empire after Alexander's death in 323 BCE, Bactria had declared its independence around 250 BCE at the same time Parthia began its rise to power in northern Iran. Somewhat protected by mountainous terrain from the Parthian-controlled regions on its southern and western flanks, Bactria and its capital city of Bactra (Balkh) on the southern edge of the Oxus valley were relatively open to the north across the Oxus to the Central Asian trading centers of Samarkand (Maracanda), Bukhara, and Tashkent that marked the northern limit of Alexander's conquests. But Bactria was also, as Alexander's Indian campaign had shown, in a strategic location to control the Kābul River valley and the Khyber Pass that led eastward down to Gandhāra and the valley of the Indus. From Alexander's time onward, Bactria had served as the gateway between these two regions to its north and to its east, and it was in this role that it functioned to channel a flow of foreign invaders into India after it became an independent kingdom. It was more than a neutral channel, moreover, because it remained a center of Greek culture -- later reinforced by Greco-Roman influences via the Silk Route -- from the time of Alexander's conquest until the decline of Kushān power in the third century CE. It was thus not only the foreign invaders from Bactria per se, but the Greek culture that they carried with them

into India, that provided the climactic challenge to Brahmanical traditions in the aftermath of Mauryan decline.

The start of this process of foreign invasion came early in the second century BCE when the Bactrian Greek king Demetrius, having established a base in Gandhāra, carried out raids across North India that gave him control for a time of all of Madhyadeśa. This early penetration was turned back from central India by a combination of political unrest in Bactria and the military efforts of Pushyamitra Śunga after the fall of the Mauryan dynasty, but Greek kings retained their initial Indian foothold in Gandhāra as well as large areas of western India. The most famous of the later Greek kings, Menander, who is known in Buddhist texts as a great supporter of Buddhism, apparently controlled most of western India from the Punjab to Sind and the Saurāśtra peninsula late in the second century BCE. Another later ruler, Antialcidas, perhaps a contemporary and rival of Menander, sent an ambassador named Heliodorus from his capital in Gandhāra to the Śunga court at Vidiśā around 113 BCE -- as we know from the famous Garuḍa pillar he erected at nearby Besnagar to declare his devotion to Vāsudeva (Viṣṇu) as a self-professed bhāgavata.

By the time of these later Indo-Greek kings, however, despite their continuing power in Gandhāra and western India, Bactria itself had been wrested from Greek rule by the Parthians and was being invaded from the north by Scythian (Śaka) tribes from Central Asia. Bactria was soon yielded in practical effect to Śakas who ruled during the early first century BCE as nominal viceroys to the Parthians, but by the end of the first century BCE, the Śaka ruler Maues had declared his independence of Parthia, extended his rule into Gandhāra, and established a kingdom in India that stretched as far eastward as Mathurā. Parthian control was reestablished in southern Bactria and

Gandhāra early in the first century CE by a new ruler named Gondophernes or Gondophares, apparently of Scytho-Parthian origins, but Śaka conquests in India continued at the expense of earlier Indo-Greek kingdoms in western India and portions of the Śātavāhana territory in Mālwā. By the end of the first century CE, all of western India was under the control of regional Śaka rulers known as Kshatrapas with their centers of power in Gandhāra, Mathurā, Ujjain (the former Mauryan/Śunga capital in Mālwā), and -- though temporarily -- in the northern Deccan on the edge of the Śātavāhana kingdom.

The final stage in this sequence of foreign intrusions was the conquest of northern India by yet another Central Asian tribal dynasty, the Kushāns, who established an empire that at its height stretched from the borderlands of Han China in Central Asia to at least as far into India as Mathurā and perhaps as far as Benares on the Ganges. The chronology of this empire has been a matter of much debate, but there is increasing scholarly agreement on a date of 110-115 CE for the founding of Kushān rule in India by Kanishka, the greatest of the Kushān kings, which is probably also the high point of Kushān imperial power. Since Kushān rule in India is known to have lasted for 157 years from the start of Kanishka's reign, this would bracket the Kushān period in north India between 110/115 and 267/272 CE.

The Kushāns, like the Śakas whom they followed into India, had a long pre-history in Central Asia before they moved southward into Bactria and laid the foundation for their Indian conquests. Known to the Chinese as the Yüeh-chih, the tribes from which the Kushāns emerged were first mentioned in Chinese records from the early second century BCE as nomadic herders living on the southern fringe of the Gobi Desert. Conflicts with other tribes forced them to move from this area by the

middle of the century, and by 129 BCE -- again as recorded by the Chinese -- they were living as nomads north of the Oxus River and exerting a powerful influence on Bactria. In the course of the next century, concurrent with the decline of Śaka power in Bactria (and perhaps as a major factor in that decline), the Yüeh-chih moved south across the Oxus into Bactria, adapted to the urbanized Greek culture of the region, reorganized their tribal structure under the rule of a single king around 35 BCE, and under their unified leadership established the Kushān dynasty.

Kujula Kadphises, the first in the new line of Kushān rulers, apparently at first controlled only the northern portion of Bactria (the region of Bactra/Balkh south of the Oxus) and the region of earlier Yüeh-chih nomadic settlement north of the Oxus. The Śaka king Maues controlled Gandhāra in the latter part of the first century BCE, as noted earlier, and the Parthian king Gondopernes was soon to gain control of both southern Bactria and Gandhāra early in the first century CE. Even as the first Kushān dynastic king, however, Kujula already saw himself as an imperial monarch, as evidenced by coins with a profile bust of the Roman emperor Augustus on the obverse and a full-length figure of the seated king in Indo-Scythian costume on the reverse. As Rosenfield points out, "In the coin symbolism of the ancient world, the depiction of the full figure of a prince on his coins is considered a sign of the heightened status of the ruler" (Rosenfield, Dynastic Arts of the Kushans, 13). Greek rulers in India did not use this symbolism, and only a few of the Śaka rulers such as Maues had full-length portraits on their coins. The combination of this hieratic symbolism with that of a Roman emperor represents certainly an even higher claim, especially coming from a ruler whose status had only recently been established. This impression is reinforced by other coins that bear the Greek legend "Basileus Soterios" and the Indian

vernacular legend "Steadfast in the Law." Clearly the Kushān rulers from the very beginning saw themselves as something special, and saw their importance moreover in terms that paralleled the claims of emperors of Rome itself. The very use of the symbolism of Augustus, of course, also reveals the emerging presence of Roman cultural influence in Kushān territories in the early years of the Silk Route trade that opened up after Augustus' treaty with the Parthians in 20 BCE. It seems likely from this evidence that the Kushāns, with their early base in the region north of the Oxus, were already playing a role in this trade by the time of Kujula's rise to power. It is certain that they did so soon afterward, and that their income from this trade -- especially in the form of gold coins and bullion -- was a major source of the empire's economic prosperity. (See Rosenfield, DAK, 19-22).

Bactria remained not only the center but also the southern limit of Kushān power for some time after Kujula established dynastic control, but in the later years of his long reign he apparently extended Kushān rule into the Kabul/Gandhāra region on the heels of Gondophernes' Parthian invasion. The chronology of this stage of Kushān expansion is very uncertain, but the time of this first entry of the Kushāns into India was almost certainly during the first half of the first century CE. The sequence at this stage of Kushān history is confused in part because of the presence of large numbers of copper coins in the Kushān style throughout the region from southern Central Asia to Gandhāra and even as far as Mathurā, all issued under the title of SOTER MEGAS ("The Great Savior") but otherwise undesignated by personal name. The most likely explanation is that these coins were issued by Vima Kadphises, Kujula's son or brother, while he was serving as a viceroy and/or before he assumed the imperial throne later in the first century. The coins in any case seem to fit into the

chronological period between Gondophernes and Vima's reign as emperor, and reflect the advance of Kushān territorial control into India -- an advance that Chinese chroniclers ascribe to Vima (see Rosenfield, DAK, 17-18 and David W. MacDowell, "The Pattern of the Kuṣāṇa Copper Coinage and the Role of Mathurā," in D. Srinivasan, Mathurā, 153-161). And whoever "Soter Megas" may have been, and whatever his connection with Vima Kadphises, there is no doubt about the status of Kushān power during Vima's reign as the first of the so-called "Great Kushāns."

As was true of Kujula before him, Vima proclaimed his position in no uncertain terms on his coins, especially on the gold coinage that he initiated early in his reign: the first gold coins minted in India, and themselves a statement of the power and prosperity that derived -- as did the gold itself -- from the Kushān role in trade with Rome. Vima's coins were more than just an affirmation of wealth, however; they were also a statement about the emperor's personal religious position and his enhanced view of royal authority. The symbolism on Kujula's coins had more to do with political authority and legitimacy than with religious claims, as was fitting for a newly-established dynastic ruler, although -- perhaps reflecting the Greco-Bactrian setting of their issue -- Herakles does appear on the reverse of one type of his copper coins with BASILEOS SOTEROS on the obverse, and Nike appears on the reverse of a rare silver coin issued apparently late in his reign in Gandhāra (with an illegible legend on the obverse). By contrast, Vima's gold coins of all types, regardless of what appears on the obverse, all have either a figure of Śiva or his trident (triśūla) symbol on the reverse, and on most of the types the legend in vernacular (Kharoṣṭhi) script on the reverse identifies Vima himself in terms of epithets usually associated with Śiva, such as sarvīoga isvarasa (Skt. sarvaloka-iśvara, "Lord of All the World") or isvarasa (Skt.

īśvara, "Lord") in addition to more ordinary titles such as maharajasa (Skt. mahārāja, "great king"), rajadirajasa (Skt. rājādhirāja, "king of kings"), and trādara (Skt. trātri, "protector, savior"). On some of the coin types, moreover, Vima appears on the obverse in full-length poses (standing, sitting, riding on an elephant, etc.), often with flames coming from his shoulders and in a few cases sitting on or emerging from stylized rocks or clouds.

There is little doubt that Vima's coins collectively make a strong claim for at least superhuman status if not divinity. Many of the symbols associated with him on the coins -- flaming shoulders, divine epithets, heavenly mountains or clouds -- were symbols of divinity in Greco-Roman and/or Iranian culture, and their meaning could hardly be missed in an Indian cultural setting that had received Greek, Śaka, and Parthian influences for over two centuries. The association with Śiva -- at times, with the sharing of epithets, at least an implied identification -- seems also to point in the same direction, especially when we note the close connection between Kujula's use of Herakles on his coins and Vima's use of Śiva. The representation of the divinized hero Herakles certainly had resonance in the Hellenized culture of Bactria, but would not be meaningful for most Indians. Instead of Herakles, Vima therefore chose Śiva for his divine symbol -- but a Śiva who in early representations on the coins bears a strong resemblance to Herakles. On some of the coins, in fact, Śiva is shown carrying an animal pelt over his arm and is distinguished from Herakles mainly by his trident symbol. The identification is much clearer on other coins where Śiva is shown with his bull, Nandi, but we must note also that "Śiva" is never designated by name on any of Vima's coins, and the identification is left to the viewer. The appeal of Śiva to the Kushāns is in any case an interesting issue no matter how we interpret the Herakles-

Śiva connection, because Śiva not only appears on numerous Kushān coins after Vima with a more complete set of symbols and a consistent name (OESHO, or Skt. Īśa, "Lord"), but he is also almost the only Indian deity apart from Buddhist figures who had a significant long-term following outside of India at least as far as Bactria and Central Asia.

It is evident from all of this that the Kushāns had made major advances by Vima's time from their origins as a Central Asian tribal kingdom in Bactria, not only in their territorial gains and the wealth they acquired from the control of trade routes, but in their heightened sense of royal status and their eclectic appropriation of symbols -- including Indian symbols -- to make their imperial claims. It was on this base established by the end of Vima's reign that the next two Great Kushāns, Kanishka and Huvishka, raised the Kushān Empire to its peak of power and authority.

The beginning of Kanishka's reign in 110-115 CE (Rosenfield's preferred dates) was marked by the introduction of a new dating system, now referred to as the Kanishka Era (KE), that was used consecutively for 98 years during the reigns of Kanishka (1-23 KE, or between the outside limits of 110-138 CE), Huvishka (28-64/67 KE, or 138-182 CE), and Vāsudeva I (64-98 KE, or 174-213 CE), and was resumed after an apparently short break for another 57 years under later Kushān rulers in Mathurā (i.e., until at least 265/270 CE). Kushān territorial control in India was at its height in the early part of this period, thanks to Vima's and Kanishka's conquests across North India through the heart of Madhyadeśa and eastward as far as Benares or perhaps -- by some reports -- as far as the former Mauryan capital of Pāṭaliputra.

Kanishka's task was to integrate these new gains and consolidate the now vastly extended trans-regional Kushān dominions into what the Persians later called

the Kushanshahr, the Kingdom of the Kushāns. We have no details on how he accomplished this, but the result was an imperial system that maintained direct rule for more than 150 years over a central core of territory that stretched from the Kushāns' Indian capital at Mathurā to Gandhāra and nearby Kashmir, crossed the Hindu Kush along the Kābul valley to Bactria, and ended in the upper Oxus valley. Within this territory, Kanishka and his successors controlled the essential trade routes on which Kushān prosperity depended; outside the regions they ruled directly, they maintained suzerainty over neighboring powers to whatever degree was possible to keep their central domain secure. The success of Kanishka in making this system work established Kushān power for generations to come and gave him a legendary status, especially among the Buddhists who received his major patronage. Only his successor Huvishka, however, was able to maintain the same level of power and prosperity, and then only after overcoming serious disruptions early in his rule. The reign of the next emperor, Vāsudeva I, was marked by an evident decline in Kushān control over neighboring native states in India and unrest in other parts of the empire beyond Gandhāra. The founding of the Persian Sasanian Empire in 226 CE and the Sasanian invasion of Kushān sites in the Kābul valley around 242 CE reduced Kushān power even further, although the empire retained its rule over Mathurā and Gandhāra until late in the third century when it was finally supplanted by native rulers.

In all of this tangled history, it is the reigns of Kanishka and Huvishka that provide the most useful data for an understanding of Indian religion and Indian kingship. As was true of Kujula and Vima, much of this data comes from the coins that Kanishka and his successor issued during the more than 60 years of their combined reigns. Unlike the Greco-Roman styles of Kujula's coins or Vima's use of the single

deity OESHO (Śiva) to symbolize his title of "Lord of all the World," the coins of Kanishka and Huvishka together present a cross-cultural pantheon of deities drawn from all of the regions and peoples of the Kushanshahr. Rosenfield counts 33 named deities on the coins of these two rulers, representing three main cultural traditions (DAK, 69-103). Of these three, the Hellenistic/Roman tradition is represented by only 6 deities (Herakles, Helios, Hephaistos, Roma [?], Salene, and Serapis), none of them represented by more than a few coin types, and the Indian tradition by only 5 (Buddha, OESHO/Śiva, Mahāsena, Skanda-Kumāra, and Vishākha), all of them also uncommon except for OESHO/Śiva. By far the largest number of deities are those from the Iranian tradition, including all of those besides OESHO/Śiva that are commonly represented on a variety of coin types: ARDOXSHO, goddess of prosperity, usually shown holding a cornucopia, the equivalent of the Greek Tychae or Demeter and the Indian Śrī-Lakṣmī; ATHSO, god of fire, the equivalent of the Greek Hephaistos and Indian Agni; MAO, the moon god, always represented as male and martial, whose name (but not the male/martial qualities) is related to the Iranian Māh; MIRO/Mithra, the Iranian solar deity, equivalent to the Greek ELIOS/Helios and the Indian solar god Sūrya; NANA, goddess of natural powers of fertility and life and also goddess of battles, often shown seated on a lion, the equivalent of the Mesopotamian Inanna/Ishtar/Astarte and perhaps assimilated in Kushān culture with the Iranian goddess Anāhitā with whom she has ancient Elamite connections (and also closely equivalent to the Indian Durgā with her Indus valley and proto-Elamite connections), assimilated on some Kushān coins to the goddess OMMO/Umā as the wife of OESHO/Śiva; and PHARRO, the personification of the Iranian concept of Khvareno, the glory and legitimacy of kings, and -- as the bestower of wealth -- equivalent to the Indian god Kubera.

The length of this list alone is a dramatic contrast to the limited number of deities on the coins of earlier Kushān kings: Herakles and Tyche on Kujula's coins, and only OESHO/Śiva on Vima's otherwise varied coinage. What is even more striking, however, is the degree to which Kanishka and Huvishka chose to present themselves as Iranian rulers by the deities used to symbolize their power. It is clear that this was a matter of choice and not necessity. Corresponding Greek and/or Indian deities could have been used as earlier Śaka rulers had used Lakṣmī as their symbol of royal prosperity, or more familiar names could have been used for equivalent deities as was common practice throughout the Greco-Roman world at that time. Instead, both Kanishka and Huvishka seem to have rejected such strategies of accommodation and asserted instead their status not as Indian kings but as imperial monarchs with their own dynastic identity and divine support. This is reflected especially in the prominent place of the Kushān-Iranian patron goddesses ARDOXSHO and NANA on their coins instead of Indian goddesses of prosperity and fertility, and is expressed perhaps most directly by Kanishka's early abandonment of Greek (obverse) and Indian (reverse) royal titles on his coins (Basileos, Mahārāja, etc.) in favor of the Iranian title Shaonanoshao on the obverse and the deity's title in Greek letters on the reverse, a practice continued also on the coins of Huvishka.

The presence of five Indian deities on the coins of these two rulers, as noted earlier, and especially the frequent and varied depictions of OESHO/Śiva, would seem at first glance to contradict this general pattern. If we look more closely at these deities, however, we can see that as a group they tend instead to confirm it. Since the reasons differ somewhat for the Buddha, OESHO/Śiva, and the interrelated set of

Mahāsenā, Skanda-Kumāra, and Vishāka, it is best to look at each of these separately.

(a) Buddha

Given Kanishka's reputation as a great patron of Buddhism, it is not surprising to find the Buddha represented on his coins (though not on the coins of Huvishka). What is surprising is the relative rareness of such coins: one gold coin with an image labeled BODDO found in the reliquary of a stupa in the Kābul valley, and four different types of copper coins. The image on the gold coin shows evidence of being based on a sculptured original (so Rosenfield, DAK, 77). Collectively, these are in any case among the earliest known images of the Buddha in any form, and represent a very early stage of image development.

The relative rareness of the Buddha on Kanishka's coins may be simply a function of the fact that anthropomorphic images of the Buddha were only just emerging during his reign, or it may be due to factors that we do not yet understand. What is important to recognize, however, is that from Kanishka's perspective Buddhism would not have been seen as a distinctively Indian religion. There were certainly Buddhist centers in Bactria and Central Asia by his time, since Buddhism had reached China in the previous century, and much of the Buddhist activity during his reign was in Kashmir, Gandhāra, and on beyond India proper. The gold coin just noted, for example, was found to the west of Peshāwar, and it was near Peshāwar that Kanishka's famed great stupa was constructed (DAK, 34-36). The Buddha who appears on Kanishka's

coins was therefore probably not viewed as an Indian deity, but as belonging to the larger Kushān cultural sphere.

(b) OESHO/Siva

Much the same can no doubt be said about OESHO/Śiva, the most commonly represented "Indian" deity on the coins of both Kanishka and Huvishka. All of the coins of their predecessor Vima, as we have seen, had OESHO/Śiva on the reverse, and some of those coins -- logically, at least, the earlier ones -- show Śiva with the mace and animal pelt of Herakles. It seems certain that there was an early syncretism between the Bactrian Greek figure of Herakles (as found on Kujula's coins) and the "Indian" deity Śiva, but it is equally certain that this did not take place only or even primarily in India; it was rather a development within the Kushān heartland that was adopted by Vima for his coins as an expression of his own Kushān religious concerns. This point is underscored by the presence of a rather crude early stone carving of Śiva in the hills of northern Bactria that shows him with three faces and four arms, holding a trident and club in his right hands and a lion pelt over his only remaining left arm (DAK, 93-94, Fig. 126). The sculpture is from the Kushān period, and is representative of what was happening in that region and what is reflected on Kushan coins. It should be noted also that none of the figures on Vima's coins is labeled with a name, even those that show what is certainly Śiva with a trident and his bull; it is only with Kanishka and his successors that the label OESHO came into use as part of the new pattern of placing deities' names on the reverse

along with their images. We thus do not know when the Greco-Roman image of Herakles had acquired enough of the characteristics of Śiva to acquire also a new name and represent a new divine identity. The issue may well have been left intentionally open for some time to allow for an ambiguous syncretic identity that would appeal to followers of both deities.

There is no such ambiguity in any case by ^{the} time of Kanishka's OESHO coins, not only because an inscribed title now identifies the figure but because the iconography of the OESHO images is much more specific. OESHO on Kanishka's coins has four arms, the upper right holding a drum or vajra, the lower right a vase and elephant goad (ankuśa), the upper left a trident, and the lower left an antelope or stag (mṛiga). This four-armed form was continued on Huvishka's coins, though with some variation in the hands that hold specific attributes and with additional elements on a few coins: a crescent above OESHO's head on one, three faces on an ithyphallic OESHO on another, and a club in the lower left hand of a three-faced OESHO on yet another. The representation of OESHO had clearly moved beyond the early synthesis with Herakles by the time of these two rulers and must certainly reflect a well-developed mythology of Śiva to support the iconographic details. Despite the similarity of these coin images to classical Hindu images of Śiva, however, the Kushāns probably still did not see OESHO as a specifically Indian deity whose presence on their coins would compromise their self-proclaimed Iranian identity.

(c) Skanda-Kumāra, Mahāsenā, and Viśākha

The situation is somewhat less clear with regard to the final three Indian gods on Kushān coins, the interrelated set of SKANDO-KOMARO, MAASENA/O, and BIZAGO. These deities appear only on the coins of Huvishka, i.e., between 138 and 182 CE by Rosenfield's dating, and only on a few basic coin types. One type shows two male figures in dhotis and wearing swords standing opposite each other, one -- labeled BIZAGO -- holding a trident in his left hand and the other -- labeled SKANDO-KOMARO -- holding a knobbed staff. Another type shows three male figures standing side by side on a kind of canopied platform, the two flanking figures similar to the first type and with the same labels and the central figure with hands on hips and the label MAASENA, while a third type shows a single figure labeled MAASENO wearing a sword on his left hip and holding a standard with a bird finial in his right hand.

It is not difficult to identify these warrior figures by their Sanskrit names as Viśākha, Skanda-Kumāra, and Mahāsenā. The problem is that by Gupta times and in later Hinduism these names are all associated with a single deity known also as Kārttikeya, Brahmanya, and Subrahmanya, rather than with separate deities as shown on Huvishka's coins. It is not only Huvishka's coins that pose the problem, however, because the warlike tribal republic of the Yaudheyas, who controlled the eastern Punjab north of the Kushān corridor during the reigns of Kanishka and Huvishka, issued coins during that period with an image of a six-headed warrior holding a spear in his left hand and legends

identifying him as "Kumāra, the divine lord Brahmanya-deva" or simply as "the divine lord Brahmanya" (Banerjea, Development of Hindu Iconography, 141). And, to complicate the matter still further, a large (3/4 life size) stone sculpture of a spear-holding warrior figure has been found at Mathurā with an inscription dedicating it to "Kārttikeya" on behalf of two brothers who describe themselves as Kshatriyas and date their donation in the year 11 (of the later Kushān series, in Rosenfield's view) or ca. 220-225 CE -- i.e., some 40 or 50 years after Huvishka's reign.

We know from this evidence that the worship of warrior deities was widespread during the Kushān period, and we know from other evidence that at least some of these were deities of long standing. The grammarian Patañjali, writing in the early to middle second century BCE, says that images of deities were being made and sold by the Mauryans in his day for the purpose of worship (pūjā), and gives as examples of such deities Śiva, Skanda, and Viśākha (Banerjea, DHI, 85). It seems clear from this that Skanda and Viśākha were considered separate deities at that point, but it also seems that they were closely connected already not only with each other but also with Śiva; all three were at the least in Patañjali's mind associated with a common pattern of image-making and worship, and we know that some other early sources consider Skanda and Viśākha as brothers while others refer to Skanda as the son of Śiva (Clothey, The Many Faces of Murugan, 57).

Fred Clothey (MEM, 45-61) has made a comprehensive survey of the evolution of Skanda, Viśākha, and other deities that later merge in

the Brahmanical warrior god Skanda-Kārttikeya, and has shown that the relationships of these various warrior gods with each other and with Śiva was still extremely fluid during the period from Patañjali onward when the Hindu Epics were being formed -- i.e., the centuries leading up to and probably including the Kushān period. The Mahābhārata alone has at least three separate lengthy accounts of the origins of Skanda, each different from the others, and the Rāmāyana has yet another different version. His conclusions from this evidence echo Banerjea's assessment of much of the same data, that "there were many allied god-concepts that were at the root of the later unified idea of a deity by the name of Skanda-Kārttikeya" (DHI, 362). In Clothey's view, it was not until the time of the Guptas that a more or less normative mythological account was established for this unified deity by a synthesis of the earlier traditions, but even this orthodox version of course functioned only as a textual authority alongside the continuing variety of Epic myths and popular practice.

If we place the Kushān data within this larger context, we have no good reason to assume that Huvishka saw the individual warrior deities on his coins as other than separate but related popular warrior gods of a sort familiar from his own tribal background. It is possible also that he chose to represent such deities on his own coins as a reaction or counteraction to the practice of the tribal Yaudheyas, whose troublesome intrusions into the Kushān corridor disrupted the early years of Huvishka's reign and who viewed their own power as derived from their

tutelary warrior god Brahmanya. It is suggestive that Kanishka presented no such deities on his coins while the Yaudheyas were held in check, and that they only appear when the rival tribal chiefdom becomes a problem for the security of Huvishka's rule. It is also likely that the connection of these warrior gods to Śiva, already a developed belief by that time outside Brahmanical circles, would have made these popular Indian deities more acceptable to the Kushāns, since OESHO/Śiva had been adopted by the Kushāns as one of their own important deities long before the reign of Huvishka.

If we look, finally, at the Kushān coins as a whole, we can see that the use of a few selected Indian deities by Kanishka and Huvishka does not contradict their emphasis on Iranian deities and their use of the Iranian title Shaononoshao. The key word here is "selected," because it is clear that the Indian deities on their coins -- Buddha on Kanishka's coins, OESHO/Śiva on the coins of both, and Skanda-Kumāra, Viśākha, and Mahāsenā on Huvishka's coins -- constitute a very limited sample of the available choices. Earlier Śaka rulers used Lakṣmī on their coins, for example, as did the contemporary Yaudheyas on the reverse of their Brahmanya coins, but the Kushāns used only the equivalent Iranian goddess of good fortune, ARDOXSHO, and the related Iranian goddess NANA. Most striking is the total absence of Vāsudeva/Kṛṣṇa, Saṃkarṣana/Balarāma, Viṣṇu, or any other figure from the Bhāgavata or Vaiṣṇava systems, despite the fact that Mathurā was a major center for the Bhāgavata tradition and an important center of Bhāgavata and Vaiṣṇava art both before and during the Kushān period. Even Huvishka's successor Vāsudeva I, though he used the name of the main Bhāgavata deity, issued only coins with an image of

OESHO. Clearly, while the Kushans were in India and Mathurā, they never were of India and Mathurā.

Apart from the evidence of the coins, this point is made most forcibly by the Kushān dynastic shrines at Māt and Surkh Kotal: the former in an isolated area across the Yamunā River from Mathurā, the latter on an isolated hilltop in southern Bactria halfway between Bactra/Balkh and Kābul. Both of these shrines are associated with the three main Kushān rulers (Vima, Kanishka, and Huvishka), both have monumental statues of Kushān rulers, and both are designated as a "god-house" (devakula and bago-laggo, respectively), features that together have led to much speculation about their intended purpose. Accurate assessment has been seriously hindered by the fact that both shrines suffered major damage and disturbance at the end of the Kushān period and that the Māt shrine -- the first to be discovered -- suffered further disruption as a result of poor excavation in 1911-1912. It is only with the more recent and much more careful excavation at Surkh Kotal that the two clearly related shrines can be interpreted with some degree of certainty. (See Rosenfield, DAK 138-151, for a detailed description of the Māt shrine and its artifacts, and Gérard Fussman, "The Māt devakula: A New Approach to Its Understanding," in Mathurā, 193-199, for a description of the Surkh Kotal shrine and an interpretation of the two shrines together.)

On the basis of what is now known, it seems possible to say with some certainty that both of these shrines were dedicated to the tutelary deity or deities of the Kushān rulers, and that the images of the rulers in the shrines were not intended as objects of worship but instead were placed in the shrines to represent the rulers themselves as worshippers. Gérard Fussman, who wrote the final report on the Surkh Kotal excavation, finds the closest parallels to these Kushān devakulas in the stories of the

Buddha and the bodhisattva Prince Dīpaṅkara (the Buddha in one of his former lives) in a transitional Buddhist text known as the Mahāvastu. In this text, a predecessor to the Mahāyāna scriptures, both Dīpaṅkara and Gautama are said to have been taken as soon as they were born to a royal devakula to worship the resident goddess. Fussman concludes from the text's two accounts of this practice that "a devakula is a true house of god" in which a "cult icon of the god or goddess" is located (the goddess Abhayā, "Unfearful," in the case of Gautama), and that "the devakula spoken of in Mahāvastu is thus a temple of some Śrī ['royal Fortune'], specially linked to the royal family, to whom the newly born king-to-be (for a Buddha-to-be is always born as a king-to-be, and even as a cakravartin-to-be) must first pay worship to ensure prosperity for him, his family and his kingdom." The statues of kings in such a devakula, he argues, are thus "not proper gods" but are the husbands or former husbands of the kingdom's goddess of prosperity and good fortune (Mathura, 198).

Fussman's observations reinforce Rosenfield's reflections on the parallels between the Kushān devakulas and other royal shrines in their cultural orbit such as the Hierothesion erected by Antiochus I of Kommagene (69-34 BCE) at Nimrud Dagh in Anatolia and the Parthian royal centers at Shami in Elam in the late centuries BCE and at Hatra in northern Iraq in the early centuries CE (DAK, 154-172). Though all of these sites defy detailed interpretation, they all present royal statues in conjunction with a variety of images of gods and goddesses and, in the broadest sense, they all are affirmations of the close ties between the portrayed rulers and the divine powers on whom their royal lineage depended. The most impressive as well as the most explicit of these royal monuments is the Hierothesion at Nimrud Dagh, a complex of giant statues some thirty feet high portraying a series of syncretic Greek and Iranian

gods (Verethraghna-Herakles-Ares, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, and Zeus-Ahura Mazda), the goddess Tyche, and on her right hand Antiochus himself, all standing on a platform decorated with relief carvings of Antiochus' Persian, Macedonian, and Kommagenian ancestors. There is no explicit claim that Antiochus himself is divine, but he certainly is claiming the companionship and protection of the gods and goddesses from all his ancestral traditions. Tyche, goddess of good fortune, has a special place in this pantheon not only by her location next to the king but by her representation as Kommagene personified and an inscription stating that Antiochus is the new Tyche of the state. While this symbolism of the goddess has its own distinctive features in the context of Antiochus' Kommagene, one can hardly avoid the parallelism with the role of Ardoxsho for the Kushans -- especially since, as Rosenfield points out, the fruit-laden headdress on the Nimrud Dagh Tyche conveys the same meaning as the cornucopia held by Ardoxsho on Kushān coins (and, of course, the symbolism of native Indian yakṣīs and of the closely-related Indian goddesses Śrī and Lakṣmī).

There is only so far that one can go in comparing such diverse data as the Nimrud Dagh Hierothesion, Parthian royal shrines, statements in the Buddhist Mahāvastu, and Kushān dynastic sanctuaries at Māt and Surkh Kotal. What this evidence indicates at least, however, is that the Kushān shrines existed in a widely-dispersed and long-lasting cultural environment that linked Greek and Iranian traditions in a powerful interregional syncretism of deities and symbols. It was undoubtedly this culture with which the Kushāns identified themselves as Iranian rulers, that they expressed on their coins, and that they embodied in their dynastic shrines with their royal portrait statues and the images of their deities. The condition of the shrines prevents our knowing who these deities were, but there seem to have

been both main and subsidiary deities in the manner of the shrines in Parthia and Kommagene. One of the small images at Māt was apparently Nana with her lion, and there are relief sculptures at Surkh Kotal of a goddess of victory and of Śiva in two instances with his bull and in another with his bull and a goddess -- most likely Umā or OMMO from the evidence of Kushān coins. There is no direct evidence to indicate who the primary deity may have been in either shrine, but the indirect evidence from Parthia and Kommagene and the accounts in the Mahāvastu strongly suggest a goddess of prosperity or victory -- and if so, it would most likely have been Ardoxsho from her prominent role on Kushān coins throughout the reigns of Kanishka and Huvishka.

Even without identifying the main deities in these shrines, however, the purpose of the shrines and the sequence of their construction give us important insights into the nature of Kushān rule. Most revealing, perhaps, is the fact that the shrine at Māt near Mathurā was built during Vima's reign -- i.e., when Mathurā first came under Kushān control -- and was apparently the earlier of the two shrines, while the much larger shrine at Surkh Kotal ("gigantic," in Fussman's terms, as compared to the "big" Māt shrine) was completed during Kanishka's reign and has a long founding inscription in his name. This sequence, together with the intended purpose of the shrines, strongly reinforces the evidence from coins that shows Kanishka deliberately stressing the Iranian or non-Indian base of his power. This evidence is also consistent with the fact that the initial Surkh Kotal constructions (an outside fortified wall or peribolos of 167.5 x 87.5 meters, a courtyard 75 x 70 meters, and the shrine itself 47 x 40 meters) were designed by an architect with a Greek name, as we know from an inscription, and that the associated royal inscriptions were in Bactrian rather than the Sanskrit used for Māt.

inscriptions. This does not imply that the Māt shrine was in any significant sense Indian, for it had an Iranian overseer and was always under the jurisdiction of Kushān functionaries, but rather that the Surkh Kotal shrine was more consistently and intentionally non-Indian. Given the world of cultures around him as well as those under his control, it is clear that Kanishka chose to identify with the Hellenistic/Parthian culture of West Asia instead of that of India, and intended his dynastic shrine as well as his coins to reflect that choice.

The attention given to Śiva at Surkh Kotal might seem to contradict this non-Indian emphasis, but it must instead reflect the Kushān perception from Vima onward that Śiva was a god of the dynasty's Bactrian homeland (or, by his early connection with Herakles, of the larger Hellenistic world) and not only, or even primarily, an Indian god -- a perception that no doubt reflected the actual widespread worship of Śiva in the Bactrian region. There is clear evidence of such worship at other sites in Bactria, and there is later evidence from Surkh Kotal itself in the form of triśūlas carved on the stone steps leading to the shrine by devotees of Śiva who used the site for pilgrimage and worship after it ceased to function as a dynastic center (Fussman, Mathurā, 197). Śiva at the Surkh Kotal shrine thus no doubt functioned as one of the native Kushān deities whose divine favor sanctioned Kushān rule, a role that parallels exactly his appearance on Kushān coins. In this context, we might note also the well-known Huvishka-era relief sculpture from Mathurā that shows two men in the clothing of Kushān nobles or warriors worshipping a Śiva linga (Rosenfield, DAK, 93 and Fig. 41). Often interpreted as proof that Kushāns adopted the worship of Indian gods, this relief more likely shows the opposite: i.e, the continuing worship by Kushāns of their own deities, in this case Śiva. This is not to say that Kushāns may not have adopted

some Indian modes of worship, if these in fact differed from the practices in other parts of the Kushanshahr; it is to say that, consistent with their general pattern, they were unwilling to adopt new objects of worship in place of their own traditional deities.

The consistency of this pattern is illustrated finally by the claim to the title of devaputra, "son of god/gods," that is made by Kushān rulers from Kanishka onward. The title was apparently first used by Kanishka in the dedication inscription for a bodhisattva image in the third year of his reign and in the inscriptions on the portrait statues of Vima and Kanishka installed in the Māt shrine during Kanishka's sixth year. After that, it appears in numerous Kushān royal inscriptions in Sanskrit at various Indian sites -- though most frequently at Mathurā -- during the rest of Kanishka's reign and the reigns of Huvishka, Vāsudeva I, and most of the later minor Kushān rulers, usually in conjunction with the titles mahārāja and/or rājātirāja (Rosenfield, DAK, 263-273).

The term devaputra is itself a very simple compound of two extremely common Sanskrit words: deva + putra ("son"). What is striking, therefore, is that this compound had no known use in Sanskrit before Kanishka. An equivalent vernacular term was used earlier in an inscription on the Bhārhut stupa to describe a demigod messenger of the gods, and an equivalent Pāli term was used for the Buddha's divine/demonic antagonist Māra in early Buddhist scriptures, but neither term was ever applied to kings (Rosenfield, DAK, 202). In the cultural/semantic world of Sanskritized northern India, there was therefore clearly no precedent for using devaputra or the concept "son of god" in any language as a royal title before it appeared on Kanishka's inscriptions.

There could hardly be a sharper contrast with this than the cultural world of West Asia, where a tradition of divinized kings stretched back four centuries before Kanishka to the Greco-Persian beliefs in Alexander's divinity and/or divine parentage. Seleucid kings from Antiochus II onward were designated gods, and Antiochus IV (176-164 BCE) assumed the title of Theos Epiphanes. Bactria, which had broken with the Seleucids in the third century BCE, nonetheless preserved the concept of divine kingship as part of its Hellenistic heritage. At least one Bactrian ruler, Antimachus (fl. ca. 190 BCE), issued coins in the name of "Antimachus Theos"; the Śaka Mahākṣatrapa Rājūvula, who ruled in Mathurā in the first century BCE, issued coins with the title "Soter" and included on his coins an eclectic choice of deities including Pallas Athene, Herakles, and Gaja-Lakṣmī; and the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophares, who ruled Gandhāra in the mid-first century CE on the eve of Kushān conquest, used both the title "Soter" and the vernacular translation tradara on his coins along with such varied deities as Nike and Śiva (Rosenfield, DAK, 124-137, 203-204).

This world of divinized kings, royal monuments and shrines, and cultural eclecticism was the world of the Kushāns as well, and the one with which they clearly identified themselves from the beginning from the evidence of Kujula's and Vima's coins. Kanishka's policy of Iranization was simply a further and more self-conscious affirmation of these existing ties expressed in terms of the Persian title and selection of deities on his coins, his creation of the dynastic shrine at Surkh Kotal, and -- it seems certain -- his use of devaputra as a royal title. As Rosenfield points out, the inscription on the entryway at Surkh Kotal identifies it, in cursive Greek script but in the Bactrian language, as "the Kanishka-Nikator sanctuary (bagolaggo, or 'god-house')," and other inscriptions at the site use the terms bagopouro ("Son of God") and bagoshao ("God

King") as royal titles (Rosenfield, DAK, 158-158, 202). Such terms seem very much at home in the West Asian culture of the time, and no doubt were a product of Bactria's involvement in it. In the syncretic climate of that culture, it must initially have seemed an easy matter to translate these terms into a relevant Indian language as Vima (and Gondophares before him) had translated "Soter" into the Prakrit tradara. It was not, however, as easy as it seemed.

Of the three terms mentioned from Surkh Kotal, only one -- bagologgo -- had an existing Indian equivalent, devakula. Bagoshao could be translated literally into Sanskrit as deva-rāja, but this title already had a different meaning: not "god-king," but "king of the gods," a familiar title of the Vedic god Indra. Rather than stake a claim to Indra's title, the Kushāns apparently just abandoned this term in their Indian domains. (A wise decision, one might note, because the asuras kept trying to win Indra's place as king of the gods in numerous Hindu myths, and always lost.)

The third term, bagopouro, presented yet a different kind of problem. It could be easily and literally translated into Sanskrit as deva-putra, and there was no previous competing use of this term to complicate the issue. The problem here was that the term devaputra, "son of god," expressed a concept that Indians could not easily apply to human kings. The difficulty this term presented is clearly stated in a Mahāyāna Buddhist text, the Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra, which Rosenfield identifies as written in northwest India in the Kushān period (DAK, 204). In the portion quoted by Rosenfield (loc. cit.), the guardians of the four quarters (the directional deities, or lokapālas) address the creator god Brahmā with what must have been a typical Indian question:

How is it that, being born among men, a king obtains
the name of a god? How is it that a king among men gets the

name devaputra? How is it that he resides in a royal palace among men?

To which Brahmā replied: As the Guardians of the World have asked me, thus for the profit of all beings I shall give this excellent doctrine. I shall tell for what cause, being born in the human realm, he is also born among kings and exercises royalty over territories.

It is through the force of his good anterior actions that he enters into a maternal womb [in another version, it is through the grace of the sovereigns of the gods]; if he is born in the human world, it is to be the sovereign of men. All the gods gather to protect and enhance him. Since he is born of the gods, he is designated noble son of the gods.

The thirty-three sovereigns of the gods each give him a royal portion, metamorphose him, and make him sovereign among men; in order to bar the route to evil actions, destroy that which is contrary to the Law, suppress impiety, smile upon those who do good in order to turn them toward the divine abode.

The answer provided by this text presumably satisfied the Buddhists who posed the question through the words of the lokapālas, and gave a meaning of devaputra that they could accept. It is important to recognize, however, that those who were making the claim to be "sons of the gods" were the Kushān rulers within whose domains the Buddhists prospered. To Buddhists, it was apparently not a problem that the kings who were born to be kings because of their good past karma were also

foreign kings, because Buddhists had long since established themselves, their Sangha, and their religious life within the homeland of these same kings. To grant these kings the status of "sons of the gods" was also probably not a problem, because "the gods" in question -- those who concerned themselves with worldly rule -- were not of primary religious importance as gods to be worshipped as a means of salvation; it was enough that they ensured security and order and suppressed impiety, and there was no obvious religious problem if they did so through designated devaputras of whatever cultural identity.

The issue for Brāhmans, on the other hand, was much more serious. The claim by the foreign Kushāns to be devaputras was at its heart a rival religious claim, since the "devas" with whom the Kushāns identified themselves were not the devas of the Brahmanical tradition. This claim must have been seen as yet another stage in the process that had undermined Brahmanical authority from the time of Aśoka onward as first Mauryans, then Greeks, then Śakas, and finally the Kushāns had imposed their rule in northern India. From the perspective of the Brahmanical heartland in Madhyadeśa, in fact, these seemed not so much a series of separate conquests as a single extended process involving allied forces from two directions, Mauryans from the east and Yavanas ("Greeks") from the west and northwest, with a common combined effect: reduced status for Brāhmans and the enhancement of Buddhists and non-Brahmanical religions.

A clear statement of this perspective can be found in the Harivaṃśa, an account of the youthful exploits of Kṛiṣṇa that was written as an addendum to the Mahābhārata around 300 CE -- i.e., near or just after the end of Kushān rule in Madhyadeśa and prior to the extension of Gupta control into that region. The form of the Harivaṃśa is

that of a purāṇa, and its contents -- like those of the later purāṇas -- are largely mythical, but it nonetheless reflects the historical situation of its time in its telling of Kṛṣṇa's career in and around Mathurā and presents, in Alf Hiltebeitel's words, "a mythical theory of historical events" ("Hinduism," in the Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 6, 350). Given the time of its writing, it is not surprising that the most significant of those events to which it gives mythic form are the invasions and rule of Madhyadeśa by foreign kings. As both Hiltebeitel and Norvin Hein have shown in recent articles, these events are given clearest expression in the Harivaṃśa's account of a combined assault on Mathurā by King Jarāsandha of Magadha from the east and his ally Kālayavana (the "Black Greek") from the west (Hiltebeitel, "Kṛṣṇa at Mathurā", and Hein, "Kālayavana, A Key to Mathurā's Cultural Self-Perception," in Mathurā, 93-102 and 223-235).

For our purposes, the relevant feature of this account is the perception by its Brahmanical authors that the forces of Magadha and of the Yavanas represent an alliance of equally dangerous threats to the welfare of Mathurā. As Hiltebeitel and Hein both show in detail, the mythic rulers Jarāsandha and Kālayavana each represents a cluster of actual historical powers: Jarāsandha the Mauryans from Magadha in the east, and Kalayavan the series of Yavana ("Greek") invaders from the west that included not only the Bactrian Greeks per se but their Śaka, Parthian, and Kushān successors. The major threat that they collectively pose is described most explicitly as a threat to social order as the Brāhmins believe it should be -- an order in which properly consecrated kings oversee a society based on the dharmaśāstras and honor the role of Brāhmins as its social and ritual authorities. As Hein most clearly points out, the issue at stake was "the question of a monarch's freedom or lack of

freedom to regulate society without reference to the dharmaśāstras and their official Brahman interpreters" (229).

It is important to note that the Harivaṃśa does not present the threat posed by the invaders in terms of their alien deities. It is clear from the symbolic details of its account that Jarāsandha's ties are with the Buddhists, and Kālayavaṇa's father is described as a worshipper of Śiva -- affiliations that fit the historical Mauryans and Kushāns. By the time of the Harivaṃśa, however, Brāhmins had become more or less reconciled to the variety of new deities and religious movements that had emerged in the previous five centuries. The teachings of the Bhāgavata and Pāñcarātra devotees of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, for example, were represented in the Brahmanically-sanctioned Mahābhārata by the Bhagavad-Gītā and the Nārāyaṇīya respectively, and the Śaivite Pāśupatas appear also in the epic along with a large body of Śiva mythology. There is archaeological evidence of cult worship of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa by the late second century BCE (the Besnagar column) and of the brothers Vāsudeva and Saṃkarṣaṇa -- the two primary vyūhas of Nārāyaṇa in the Pāñcarātra system -- by the first century BCE (inscriptions at Nanaghat and Ghosundi); the Lakulīśa cult of the Pāśupatas, who worshipped a club-wielding Śiva incarnate in a cremation-ground corpse, was an active ascetic movement by the late first or early second century CE; and the goddess, worshipped at the village level in many forms for millennia, had emerged into the mainstream by the Kushān period with images of Lakṣmī and Durgā and of the divine couple Śiva and Umā.

By the time of the Harivaṃśa, all of these disparate components of later Hinduism were too solidly established for the Brāhmins to reject them, and by then they had little inclination to do so. Instead, as is evident in the Harivaṃśa itself, many if

not all of the new theistic deities and their devotees had been brought within the now expanded Brahmanical fold. The major issue was now elsewhere, in the question of who would provide the needed protection for the Brāhmins and would grant them the authority to regulate society in accord with their dharmaśāstra ideals. It was clear that such protection and authority could only be granted by a king; it was equally clear, as the Harivaṃśa's mythic history affirms, that kings on the Mauryan or Yavana-Kushān model were not the solution because they arrogated power to themselves. What was needed, though the Brāhmins had no term for it yet, was Hindu kings.

It is in this context that the claims by Kushān rulers to the title of devaputra must have been seen by Brāhmins as symbolic of all that they feared about kings. There was no real challenge to Brahmanical authority from below, because Brahmanical standards were built into the fabric of family life at every stage by means of samskāras (life-cycle rituals) and into the structure of society by means of the varṇāśrama-dharma system that defined the roles and duties of every person in accordance with class and stage of life. Brāhmins at both the family and social level were thus the bearers and agents of the divine authority and/or special knowledge that bound family and society together in a salvific karmic process, a process that transcended generations and the temporary social identities that individuals took on during their lifetimes, and that had its continuity in the divinely sanctioned dharma of which Brāhmins were the agents, transmitters, and final authorities.

The challenge to Brāhmins could come only from those who placed themselves outside or above this system of Brahmanical dharma either by renouncing family and society or claiming a higher authority for themselves. The former -- the renouncers -- were not a practical threat on any individual level, although they might

become a problem if they organized communities with a competing system of dharma as did some Śaivite ascetics and as of course did Buddhist monks. The real threat came from above, most obviously from kings: either kings like Aśoka, who proclaimed a dharma in his own name as a public policy and supported monks who left the family and social structure, or kings like Kanishka and subsequent Kushāns who declared themselves devaputras and thus -- at least as Brāhmins must have seen it -- claimed divine authority for themselves. It can hardly be coincidence that it is kings who stand for each of these rival royal traditions who are portrayed as the invaders of Mathurā in the Harivaṃśa's story.

The problem, as Hein succinctly puts it, was that "the authority of a divine priesthood could be resisted through the authority of a sublime king." The task of Brāhmins was therefore to make sure as far as possible that no "sublime king" could claim independent divine authority above the authority vested in the Brāhmins. Their way of doing this created at the same time both Hindu kings and Hinduism: by giving Brahmanical sanction to all of the important popular deities, they eliminated independent sources of divine authority to kings outside Brahmanical supervision; and by denying divinity to kings, they placed the sanctions for royal legitimation under the authority of Brahmanical dharma rather than on the persons of the kings themselves. Temples, not palaces, were sanctioned as the place for divine kings, and there an unlimited host of deities might be enthroned. Palaces were for kings who derived their authority from divine sources higher than themselves, and that not directly but through Brahmanical mediation.

This new Brahmanical order, which found massive expression in the dharmaśāstras and purāṇas produced from the Guptas onward, sanctioned and

unleashed popular theistic developments of all kinds within the framework of Brahmanical authority and, at the same time and within the same framework, restrained and gave definite limits to the authority and power of kings. It also, over time but with a final completeness, eliminated both of the royal models -- Aśokan and Yavana-Kushān -- that Buddhists specially favored and under which Buddhism had achieved its greatest prosperity. The price for this new Brahmanical order was the restriction of Hindu kingdoms to mainly regional domains, but the removal of independent royal authority and of Buddhism along with it made this a price well worth paying from the Brahmanical perspective. If there had been a Church that increased its power and jurisdiction with an increase in royal status, then the outcome might well have been different, but Brāhmins had no such institution to promote and no centers of power to enhance by an increase in royal status. Their wealth and worldly power were therefore necessarily limited, but their own status and authority increased as royal status and authority were held in check. This was clearly the outcome that Brāhmins favored, with the result that classical Hinduism was wonderfully rich in temples, scholarship, and rituals, but was also, with rare exceptions, marked by relatively weak and transient kingdoms.

The transition from Kushān rule to the new Brahmanical order did not take place immediately, of course, but was the product of a century or more of struggle during and after the Gupta period. The founder of the Gupta Empire, Candragupta I, seems in fact to have modeled himself after the Kushān rulers, and issued gold coins with a portrait of himself and his queen on the obverse and on the reverse a figure of a goddess seated on a lion -- a replica of Kushān NANA images -- and a monogram borrowed

from that of the later Kushāns (see J. C. Harle, Gupta Sculpture, Plate 2, and Rosenfield, DAK, Fig. 7, p. 69).

Brahmanical assertions of royal divinity also reached their peak during the Gupta period, especially in the Nārada-smṛiti, which Kane dates ca. 400 CE and Buhler about a century later (Kane, History of Dharma Śāstra, Vol. III, xvii and 23-27, 32-33, 35; Burton Stein, in Essays on Gupta Culture, 69). The Laws of Manu had earlier claimed that "the Creator created the king with his essential parts taken from Indra, the Wind god [Vāyu], Yama, the Sun, Agni, Varuṇa, the Moon and Kubera the lord of wealth and therefore he surpasses all beings by his majesty," and that one should not think that even a boy-king is a human being like others, for "it is a great deity that stands (before people) in human form as a king" (Kane, HDS III, 23; see also Stein, op. cit., 70-72). The Nārada-smṛiti goes even further with its statement that "It is Indra himself who moves about on the earth as king; people can nowhere live after transgressing his orders. Since the privilege of protection is his because of his supreme power (majesty) and on account of the fact that he is benign to all creatures, the settled rule is that whatever a king does is right. Just as the husband, though weak, must be honoured by the wife, so a ruler though devoid of qualities must be honoured by his subjects" (Kane, op. cit., 35). To support this claim, the Nārada-smṛiti argues in a later verse that "the king secures dominion over (lit. purchases) his subjects by his austerities (performed in former lives) and therefore he is their lord" (Kane, idem).

The Nārada-smṛiti's position, however, was not accepted by later dharmaśāstra texts. It thus marks the maximum point in Brahmanical willingness to grant the divinity of kings, and has the effect of closing out the line of development represented by

Manu. Given the time of its composition, it seems likely that Nārada reflects the continuing influence of Kushān concepts of kingship into the Gupta period within some Brahmanical circles, especially since it justifies the authority of kings in the same terms as the Kushān-era Buddhist Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra justifies the title of devaputra: i.e., that kings are born to be kings because of the good karma acquired in their former lives.

It would not be surprising if Brāhmans saw the Guptas who conquered Madhyadeśa as liberators and were willing to exalt their status, especially when the chief agent of that conquest, Samudra Gupta (345-380 CE), issued coins showing a sacrificial horse beside a sacrificial post (yupa) on the obverse, a portrait figure of the queen (whose duty was to fan and bathe the horse) on the reverse, and a legend proclaiming "The king of kings, who performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice, having protected the earth, wins heaven" (R. C. Majumdar, The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol. III, 14-15; Joanna G. Williams, The Art of Gupta India, 25 and Plate 10c; A. K. Narain, "Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India," in Essays on Gupta Culture, 35-36). Some Brāhmans at least must have been willing to grant any status he desired to a ruler who could be described, as Samudra was by the courtier Hariṣena on the Allahabad pillar inscription, as not only "the supporter of the real truth of the Scriptures" but as "the builder of the dharma-fencing" -- and who, moreover, had demonstrated by his conquests that he had the power to back up these claims (Narain, idem; Williams, op.cit., 23).

Neither Samudra nor his successor Candragupta II, however, left it to Brāhmans to proclaim their high status. The Allahabad inscription that praises Samudra's performance of the horse sacrifice also claims that he is "equal to the gods Dhanada

[Kubera], Varuṇa, Indra, and Antaka [Yama]" (the four directional Lokapāla deities of wealth, law, power, and death respectively) and that he is "a god dwelling on earth, being a mortal only in celebrating the rites of the observances of mankind" (Majumdar, *op. cit.*, 15). One of Samudra's coin types portrays him with a bow and arrow and the legend that "having conquered the earth, the invincible one wins heaven by good deeds" (Majumdar, *ibid.*); the Allahabad inscription describes him as "the inconceivable being (puruṣa) who is the cause of the rise and fall of good and bad," a claim -- only slightly veiled -- of identity with Viṣṇu; and he adopted Viṣṇu's vāhana, Garuḍa, as his royal emblem on his official seal (Williams, *op. cit.*, 24; Narain, *op. cit.*, 36). Samudra's son and successor Candragupta II (380-414 CE) was less overt in his claims, but not only retained many of the same symbols of power such as images of Garuḍa and Lakṣmī on his coins but issued new coin types that made equal claims to exalted status: one showing the sword-wearing king with a dwarf attendant holding a parasol over his head (a symbol of royalty and/or divinity), and another -- known as the Cakravikrama type -- showing the personification of Viṣṇu's cakra (the cakra-puruṣa) granting the ruler prasāda or divine favor (Narain, *op. cit.*, 37-38; Williams, *op. cit.*, 27 and Plate 10d). There was similarly no more doubt about Candragupta's real political and military power than there was about that of his father, because he achieved what even his father had failed to accomplish: the conquest of the Śaka kingdoms in central and western India, and thus both the completion of Gupta control over all of northern India and the elimination of the last of the foreign rulers from Indian territory.

In the context of two such rulers and the climate they created, the Nārada-smṛiti's views on the divinity of kings seem little more than confirmation of what the kings -- especially Samudra -- were claiming about themselves. If we can date the

Nārada-smṛiti around 400 CE, as Kane does, then this would place the high-water mark of both Gupta royal power and the Nārada-smṛiti's support of divine kings at about the same point in time. This was also, we might note, the point at which the Guptas focused most directly on Viṣṇu, the transcendent maintainer of world order, as the divine symbol and source of royal power. Samudra adopted Garuḍa as his emblem, and the Allahabad inscription noted above identifies him with the divine Puruṣa -- almost certainly Viṣṇu. Candragupta II, much more explicitly, identified himself as a Paramabhāgavata -- a supreme devotee of Viṣṇu -- as one of his titles, and is shown on one of his coins as noted earlier receiving divine prasāda from the personified symbol of Viṣṇu's royal power. It was also during the reign of Candragupta II that a monumental relief sculpture was carved at Udayagiri showing Varāha, Viṣṇu's boar avatāra, rescuing the earth in the form of the goddess Pṛithivī -- a powerful public proclamation affirming symbolically that Viṣṇu and his royal representatives were world protectors (Williams, op. cit., 41-46). The inclusion of Lakṣmī on the coins of both Samudra and Candragupta II was likewise an implicit claim that these rulers were husbands of the goddess of Prosperity and thus again identified with Viṣṇu, the divine husband of Śrī-Lakṣmī. There is ample evidence that these two kings supported the worship of other deities as well, but there is no doubt that both -- and most decisively Candragupta II -- gave primary attention to Viṣṇu as their deity of choice.

The choice of Viṣṇu by the two most powerful Gupta monarchs had major implications not only for the Guptas themselves but for later Hindu kingship. On the most obvious level of political symbolism, it identified the Guptas with a god entirely separate from the Kushān pantheon and not associated with any rival Indian

kingdoms. Śiva, as we have seen, was an important Kushān deity from the time of Vima onward, and was the major deity also of the Nāga kings of Mathurā and northern Mālwa whom Samudra Gupta defeated in his sweeping conquests, and of the Vākāṭaka kings on the southern border of Gupta territory (Williams, op. cit., 22-23). Viṣṇu, by contrast, had no historical connection with either foreign or native rulers; he was not connected with the despised "Yavanas," nor had his worshippers suffered defeat at the hands of conquerors. More importantly and more substantively, moreover, he brought with him the massive body of mythology and dharma texts represented by the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, the two great epics whose primary teachings and major heroes were all connected to Viṣṇu either directly or through his avatāras Kṛiṣṇa and Rāma.

Considering the massive importance of the Epics in later Hinduism, it is astonishing that their resources had not been tapped by previous Indian rulers. There is archeological evidence noted above that gods who were later if not already identified with Viṣṇu or his avatāras were being worshipped by the first century BCE; the Bhagavad-Gītā had been written by that time as an integral part of the Mahābhārata; images of Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva/Kṛiṣṇa, and Saṁkarṣaṇa/Balarāma were being produced by early in the Kushān period, especially at Mathurā (Doris Srinivasan, "Vaiṣṇava Art and Iconography at Mathurā," in Mathurā, 383-392 and Plates 36. I-X); and it is probable that the Mathurā region had become by Kushān times a center of Vaiṣṇava devotion as well as Vaiṣṇava art (Srinivasan, ibid., 390). Despite all of this activity, however, and the continuing growth of the Mahābhārata during the Kushān period by the addition of new didactic material, much of it reflecting Brahmanical influence, the tradition of Viṣṇu and his avatāras apparently did not have

enough status before the Guptas to confer status on aspiring kings. Viṣṇu, Kṛiṣṇa, and Balarāma clearly had a substantial following at the popular level, but kings looked elsewhere for divine support.

It is not surprising that the Kushāns rejected the Vaiṣṇava tradition, because it was far too Indian to fit their dynastic pattern. Saṁkarṣaṇa/Balarāma and Vāsudeva/Kṛiṣṇa do appear on a coin issued by the Greek ruler Agathocles in Bactria in the second century BCE (Srinivasan, op. cit., 383), and it was an ambassador of the later Indo-Greek ruler Antialcidas who erected the Garuḍa column at Besnagar in the middle of that century, but neither Śakas nor Kushāns gave similar recognition to any of the Viṣṇu-related deities -- a fact reflected, as we have seen, in the Harivaṁśa's view of the "Yavanas" as enemies of Kṛiṣṇa. There was also, however, tension between the popular Bhāgavata tradition and the more orthodox Brahmanical supporters of Vedic ritual, as Norvin Hein points out (Hein, op. cit., 231), so that even native Indian rulers who sought Brahmanical sanction did so by performing Vedic horse sacrifices (Aśvamedhas) -- as did, for example, the Śunga successors to the Mauryans in the second century BCE, the Andhra Śātavāhanas in the first century BCE, and the Śaivite Vākāṭaka and Nāga kings in the third and early fourth centuries CE (Hein, idem; D. C. Sirkar, "The Early Vākāṭakas," in Majumdar (ed.), History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol. II, 217-221; A. K. Narain, "Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India," in Essays on Gupta Culture, 27-28 and 45; Rosenfield, DAK, 152-153). Even Samudra Gupta proclaimed himself a great performer of the Aśvamedha and issued coins to that effect, as noted earlier, and the same policy was picked up by his grandson Kumāra Gupta who ruled from 414/415 to 455 (R. C. Majumdar, HCIP, Vol. II, 230).

By the time of the Guptas, however, the tension between the Bhāgavata/Vaiṣṇava tradition and Brahmanical religion had largely been resolved in favor of an alliance between the two against truly heterodox traditions such as the Buddhists -- a position that finds powerful expression in the early purāṇas. This alliance, Hein argues, is evident already in the Harivaṃśa in its statement that "good kings heed the Vedas, sacrifice to gods and ancestors, give generous fees, know the dharmaśāstras, and appease Indra to insure rain" (Hein, op. cit., 232), and it was this alliance that Samudra Gupta used to legitimate his position by performing horse sacrifices and adopting at the same time Vaiṣṇava symbolism for his royal emblem and coins. Candragupta II's proclamation of himself as a Paramabhāgavata was thus not a claim made against Brahmanical authority (though he apparently did not perform the Aśvamedha ritual), but was rather a claim for the legitimization of his rule by both Viṣṇu and the Brāhmins who saw his rule -- and his claim -- as the best available defense of dharma and Brahmanical authority.

The reign of Candragupta II, as this evidence suggests, was thus the culmination of a number of legitimization processes. Candragupta's defeat of the Śakas eliminated the last foreign rulers from India and gave Brāhmins a sense of being once more in control of the social order and its proper dharma. Brahmanical gratitude for the achievements of Samudra and Candragupta II, and for the support they gave to Brahmanical traditions, led them in turn to give their sanction to these kings in the highest possible terms -- expressed perhaps directly, and certainly in principle, in the exalted claims for royal divinity found in the Nārada-smṛiti. And this enhanced status, sanctioned by Brahmanical support, gave Candragupta II's adoption of the Bhāgavata/Vaiṣṇava tradition the power to legitimize this tradition and the vast

religious system it brought with it in the Epics and Harivaṃśa. This conjunction of royal power, official religious sanction, and support of and by a popular religious movement thus played the same role for Hinduism that a similar conjunction during Aśoka's rule had played for Buddhism. It also, as subsequent developments showed, set these two systems on a collision course that did not end until one system -- the Hindu system -- finally prevailed.

After Candragupta II, as happened also after Aśoka, the balance of power shifted from the legitimizing power of kings to the legitimizing power of the newly enhanced religious traditions -- in this case, to the coalition of Brahmanical authority and popular Hindu theism. This shift was brought about in part by the great religious energy and activity unleashed by the coalition of Brāhmins and Hindu theists, especially the Vaiṣṇavas, and in part by the decline of Gupta power and the failure of later Gupta rulers -- at least from the Brahmanical perspective -- to perform their function of ensuring proper dharma in society. The reign of Kumāra Gupta was essentially a period of stable balance, but the reign of his successor Skandagupta (455-ca. 467) was marked both by a rapid decline in political stability in the face of Hun invasions and a shift in royal support from Brahmanical religion to Buddhism (Williams, op. cit., 63-67). The Hun (Hūṇa) invasions, which began about the time of Skanda's accession, were only temporarily halted by his military efforts and resulted, by the end of his reign, in the collapse of Gupta rule. By that time, however, Brahmanical Hinduism had effectively freed itself from the need for royal legitimation and had set its own agenda that included, as a top priority, support for kings who would protect Brahmanical dharma and give patronage for building Hindu temples --

an activity that soon replaced the performance of Aśvamedhas, both actually and symbolically, as a sign of royal piety.

The two main vehicles of this Brahmanical Hindu agenda were the purāṇas and dharmaśāstras produced in what seems an unending flow from the late Gupta period onward (for a survey of their contents, see Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, 74-130). The purāṇas, drawing from and expanding on the traditions of the Brāhmaṇas, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, and the Harivaṃśa, laid out the mythological, theological, and ritual foundations for a Hindu theism compatible with and supportive of Brahmanical dharma; the post-Gupta dharmaśāstras, drawing on but revising earlier texts such as the Laws of Manu and the Nārada-smṛiti, elaborated the details of dharma for a Brahmanical society compatible with purāṇic theism. It is on these interrelated texts that the structure of Hinduism was established, and with it the post-Gupta concept of Hindu kingship.

The details of these texts go well beyond the concerns of this essay, but several major themes should be noted that define the roles of Hindu kings after the Gupta period.

First, as discussed earlier, the aggrandized status and even divinity granted to kings in the Nārada-smṛiti are not sustained in the later dharmaśāstras. Kings are still honored and their status respected, but only if they perform their designated functions of protecting society and maintaining proper dharma -- including, not least, acknowledging Brahmanical authority. Drawing on concepts already developed in the Mahābhārata, the dharmaśāstras affirm the right of Brāhmans and ministers to overthrow or even kill kings who fail to maintain dharma, and to replace them with more suitable kings (Kane, HDS, Vol. III, 25-27). It is clear from these texts that

kingship is essential and can even be considered sacred, but that individual kings are neither. This viewpoint is summarized concisely by Burton Stein in Essays on Gupta Culture, 71-72:

The emphasis upon royal function and the idea of earthly manifestation provide important bases for sacred kingship to which Lingat has drawn attention. Kingship is the royal function exercised by powerful, yet flawed men: men who err, who sin, and who are subject to *Karma*. This powerful agent, though finite and flawed, is nevertheless active as a protector. The powerful deity to whom the king is analogized by most medieval writers or with whom he is identified by earlier writers is infinite and perfect, but gods require the intervention of men to be active. Together, the powerful human and god comprise perfect sovereignty. Medieval Vaiṣṇava theology seizes this relationship in the concept of *arcāvatāra*, the manifestation of a universal deity (Viṣṇu) in a particular place and time, made efficacious by the activities of powerful men, priests and kings. In medieval Hinduism and medieval kingship, gods and men complemented each other to create a sacred condition. In contrast to the pre-Gupta age, ritual did not dissolve the differences between men and gods -- such that men became gods; it was rather that together, with appropriate ritual intervention, gods and men established

and maintained the sacred condition of which kingship was an important manifestation.

A corollary to this understanding of kings and kingship is that kings in their own person cannot be agents of salvation or of the transfer of merit. Whatever merit a king possesses, as one dharmaśāstra text puts it, comes from the merit (punya) of his subjects when proper dharma is maintained (Kane, HDS, Vol III, 37). As to salvation, that can only be granted by the gods or achieved through proper ritual and conformity to dharma. For theistic Hinduism, this means looking to the temple rather than the palace for the means of one's salvation, and temples in the post-Gupta period were increasingly organized for this purpose. As Joanna Williams observes in the context of the art and architecture of post-Gupta temples (The Art of Gupta India, 160):

Within Hinduism, moreover, it would seem that the nature of ritual changed in a manner profoundly significant for the history of art. The image played a more consistent role in worship. The importance of pūjā or worship was recognized at this point, when the subject began to be included in Purāṇic literature. The motivation for the increase in temple building may be traced largely to the ever more assertive presence of sacerdotal customs. Inscriptions demonstrate a comparable change in ideology, for donors consistently refer to their desire to find permanence in a world of transitory glory. There was, moreover, a growth in concern for astrological proprieties, and most religious grants were made on

auspicious days. The temple is a keystone in this process, providing a setting for the requisite rituals, insuring the donor's immortality, being completed according to a priestly calendar, and reflecting the nature of worship in its very design.

The king's role in this process is limited to one of patronage and protection, as reflected in the fact that coins with royal portraits cease just at the point when images in temples are given central importance. It is a major responsibility of Hindu kings to provide for the construction of temples, just as earlier kings patronized Vedic fire sacrifices, and it is their obligation to ensure the welfare of the priests and the maintenance of dharma so that temple functions are sustained, but they are not themselves agents of salvation; it is the Brāhmans and temple priests who provide the effective rituals and it is the gods represented by the temple images -- and present in them -- who ensure their results. Even a good king can do ^{no} more than this, and a bad king who fails to do this much should be replaced.

A second and related set of themes is presented in the purāṇas, especially those closest in time to the Gupta period: the dismal conditions of the present Age of Kali ("Discord" or "Strife"), and the need in this Age to protect against heresies -- especially Buddhism. The most explicit statement of these themes is found in a typical mythic history from the Bhaviṣya Purāṇa, in a passage that Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty places in or close to the time of the Guptas ("The Image of the Heretic in the Gupta Purāṇas," in Essays on Gupta Culture, 125-126):

When King Kṣemaka had performed a great sacrifice
and destroyed all the barbarians, Kali incarnate begged

Viṣṇu to produce more barbarians as is appropriate to the Kali Age.... As the generations passed, at the time of the Mauryas and Nandas, Kali reminded Viṣṇu of his duty, and so Viṣṇu was born as Gautama, son of Kāśyapa, and he preached the Buddhist dharma. All men became Buddhists, and still the generations passed -- Candragupta, Bindusāra, and Aśoka. Then a Brāhmaṇa performed a Vedic ceremony, and by the power of the Vedic mantras four Kṣatriyas were born: Pramara, Capahāni, Śukla, and Parihāraka. They put Aśoka in their power and murdered all the Buddhists. Pramara had many descendants, and finally, when the full and terrifying Kali Age had arrived, Vikramāditya was born in order to destroy the Śakas and to promote Āryan dharma.

Without attempting a full explication of this passage, we can say at least that it states a negative view of Buddhists and of Aśoka, and that it places them at the center of the evils of the Kali Age. In this regard it echoes the mythic history of the Harivaṃśa, but with a difference: the success of king Vikramāditya in restoring dharma in the chaos of this Age, and the explicit identification of Aśoka as the Buddhist king who is put down. There is little doubt that the Vikramāditya of this myth is Candragupta II, whose historic achievement was the conquest of the Śakas and who is often given the title Vikramāditya by later Hindus. There is also little doubt about the message to Hindu kings: be like Vikramāditya, not like Aśoka.

If few later Hindu kings could match Vikramāditya, they could at least aspire to his model and avoid the rival model of Aśoka. Numerous texts make clear that standards are generally low in the Age of Kali, including standards for kings. One cannot expect kings always to come from the right ancestry or with high qualities as did kings in past Ages, and not as much is expected of them. At a minimum, however, they should follow dharma themselves and should support and honor the Brāhmins who are the guides to proper dharma. Beyond that, it is the gods --especially Viṣṇu -- who are the ultimate maintainers of the world and the source of salvation for those who live in it. Those who follow their dharma and worship the gods can eventually gain salvation, if not in this life then in future lives, as long as the order of dharma is preserved to make this possible. If kings can do little more, they can at least do this much -- which is all that can be expected of those who are, like their subjects, only limited mortals in an Age of Kali. As workers in the world, their results are confined to this world through their function of protecting society and its dharma; it is the gods, who enter into the world as avatāras and into their images as resident deities in the temples, who alone can grant salvation to their devotees.